

How To Find A Good Marriage Counselor Part II

What to Expect In the First Session (Intake)

If you see a counselor in a clinic or suite of counseling offices, a receptionist should be present and the waiting room should be pleasant and relaxing. You should register at the desk when you arrive and you'll be asked to complete registration forms and contracts. Read them carefully. You may also be asked to complete insurance forms.

Most "hour" sessions are actually forty-five minutes. Fifteen minutes are taken by the counselor to complete notes and prepare for the next session. While I've always tried to time my sessions carefully, I try to be flexible and considerate at the end of each hour. Sometimes I find myself giving a couple an extra fifteen minutes to pull themselves together, putting me fifteen minutes behind for my next couple. The extra fifteen minutes between sessions helps me catch up when I'm running behind.

Punctuality is very important. While most counselors will sometimes run about half an hour late, it should not be a pattern. Your time is important, and you shouldn't be expected to waste it waiting for your counselor. Complain if it becomes a problem.

Most marriage counselors see couples together in the first session, but I do not. Instead, I see each person separately for fifteen minutes so that I can gain their individual perspectives. Besides, I've seen too many fights break out when I see couples together for the first time. For your own comfort and security, I recommend that you see your counselor separately, at least briefly, during the first session.

The purpose of the first session is to familiarize yourself with the counselor. He has almost no opportunity to discover how to solve your problem at that point, but you can often determine your comfort and confidence in him/her. If you or your spouse react negatively to his/her style, find another counselor. He/she is there to inspire you and if he/she doesn't do that, you'll be wasting your time.

The counselor will ask you why you've come to see him/her, and you should answer that you've come for help in restoring love to your marriage. When you're asked to be more specific, you explain that you've both developed habits that hurt each other more than they help each other, and that you want to develop more constructive habits. You want to learn to meet each other's needs and avoid being the cause of each other's unhappiness. You go on to explain that you want him/her to help you achieve that goal.

At the end of the session, you're seen together and asked to complete forms so that he/she can evaluate your marital problem. I use my Love Busters Inventory (LBI), my Emotional Needs Questionnaire (ENQ) and a test of romantic love.

The LBI and ENQ are available to you in this site. If the counselor does not use these forms for his evaluation, you may suggest providing them to him to help determine your goals.

I usually try to schedule the second appointment for no more than a week later. If possible, I try to see the couple within a few days. This is because they are usually suffering from their problems and would like relief as soon as possible. I can't give them any advice after the first session because I don't know much yet. The advice comes after I've had a chance to review the forms they complete.

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What to Expect In the Second Session (Assessment)

The purpose of the second session is to review the forms you've completed and plan a strategy to resolve your marital problems. It's usually impossible to do this in one hour so you should expect this strategy session to take two.

You and your spouse should be seen alone again for at least part of the session. As your counselor suggests his/her plan, you need to be able to react honestly and the presence of your spouse may inhibit your reaction. At the end of the session, however, you should be together to formally agree to a plan which is carefully described in writing.

There's no point to treatment before a treatment plan is completed. Poorly organized counselors will often see clients for weeks before they get down to deciding how they'll proceed. During that time, the crisis is over and the motivation to solve the problem is postponed until the next crisis. The couple drops out of therapy no wiser or better off than they came. To avoid that tragic end, a counselor must focus on a treatment plan immediately, while the couple is still motivated to do something about their problem.

If your counselor claims to need several sessions before arriving at a treatment plan, resist it. Explain that even if the initial plan needs to be revised during treatment, its better to begin with some plan than no plan at all. Not only do you want to get on with it, but there's also a big risk that you or your spouse will lose motivation before the plan is completed. Most couples that come for marriage counseling need plenty of encouragement from the first session on, and its discouraging to wait for a treatment plan.

At the end of the second session, you should not only know the treatment plan, but you should also be given your first assignment. The value of marriage counseling is in what you achieve between sessions, not necessarily what you achieve during the session.

One of your first assignments should be to document the prescribed hours you spend giving each other undivided attention. Most of your other assignments will be carried out during those hours. The time you set aside for each other must be carefully guarded. Its easy to let the emergencies of life crowd out your time together, leaving you without time to solve your marital problems.

You may be able to carry out the treatment plan on your own. Perhaps all you want is professional advice regarding a strategy that will help you solve the problem. If emotional minefields and motivational swamps are not a threat to your marriage, you may find that the counselor's experience helped you think of a solution that you would not have found by yourself. If that's the case, I would recommend you set one more appointment in a week or two to guarantee that you are carrying out the plan without any need for further help. But be sure to come back if you're not making progress.

What to Expect During Treatment

From the third session on, you're guided by the treatment plan that you agreed to follow. Each week you report your successes and failure to the counselor. He/she guides you through the emotional minefields, motivational swamps and creative wildernesses. If your counselor is right for you, you'll come to like and respect him/her more and more as time goes by. You'll see your marriage improve in fits and starts. Some weeks will be blissful while others will be unbearable.

It's common for couples to experience a crisis between appointments that requires a counselor's mediation. I've usually been willing to have couples call me at the office or at home for emergencies because I realize that I'm working with couples in crisis. Sometimes a call is simply for clarification of an assignment. But I've also had threats of suicide, violent arguments and irresponsible browbeatings that need to be dealt with at the time they occur. If I get too many calls from a couple, I schedule their appointments closer together.

Both you and your spouse should be the judge of your need for continued treatment and when to terminate treatment. I usually use the success of the treatment plan to determine how to phase clients out over time. I will see them once a week in the beginning, twice a month after they are on a steady course, and once a month when they are nearing the end. It's not uncommon for couples to return after six months or a year just to check on their status.

Men generally want to get out of therapy as soon as possible, even when they were the ones that wanted it the most in the beginning. They don't like the idea of reporting to someone regarding their behavior, and my role as a counselor is to see to it that they follow through on what they promised. They often agree to anything to get their wives back, and then once she's home, they go back to their old habits.

With that type of problem in mind, don't abandon therapy unless you both enthusiastically agree to do so. If one of you wants to keep the door open, reschedule once a month or less often just in case problems arise. In the end, you and your spouse will be very much in love with each other. I have couples repeat my test for romantic love every few weeks so I can be certain we're on the right track. You might want to do something similar to measure the success of your program. But when you're in love, you don't really need a test to prove it!

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